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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning bilingual education are discussed, with a focus on the effect of social class on educational outcomes. While bilingualism tends to be associated with some educational advantages for the upper class, it often appears to result in an additional handicap within the lower ranges. In many educational outcomes affecting bilinguals, social class rather than bilingualism per se may be the factor of primary importance. Two hypotheses concerning the reason for educational underachievement of the poor are identified: the deficit and the difference hypotheses. During the war on poverty, a frequent debate concerned the hypothesis that educational failure of the poor was related to a mismatch of their native language and the language of school (i.e., the poor speak a different dialect or language distinct from middle class English). This linguistic mismatch hypothesis was applied in public schools through the Bilingual Education Act. Also considered are the effects in the schools of the Lau decision (1974) and an Office of Civil Rights' decision. Three possibly valid explanations of different effects of upper class and lower class bilingualism are also proposed. The effects of immersion of lower and middle/upper class children for the purposes of second language teaching is discussed in some depth. Additional topics include the effects of motivation, limited English speaking children, the threshold level and additive vs. subtractive bilingualism hypotheses, and local flexibility concerning bilingual education policy. (SW)

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SOCIAL CLASS AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CONTRADICTIONS

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SOCIAL CLASS AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CONTRADICTIONS*

Robert L. Politzer

BILINGUAL AND SOCIAL CLASS

In this brief paper, I should like to state my thoughts concerning some issues and questions related to the bilingual education controversy. Before entering any discussion of bilingualism and bilingual education, let me remind you of a phenomenon which under various headings, has become commonplace in pedagogical discussion: Bilingualism and bilingual education for the middle class or the rich must somehow be differentiated from the same phenomenon concerning the poor. The overall impression left by a great deal of educational data and research concerning bilingualism and school achievement (Andersson, 1977) is that one of the mean determinants of achievement is, in fact, social class. Within this overall effect, there seems to be an interaction with bilingualism: Within the upper ranges of socio-economic status, bilingualism tends to be associated with some additional educational advantages; within the lower ranges, it often appears to result in an additional handicap.

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*This article represents the text of an address, presented January, 1981, to the California Teachers Association's Blue Ribbon Bilingual Committee formed for the purpose of making policy recommendations to the Board of Directors.

This picture is, of course, not based on any specific research study; but I believe it could be substantiated by the meta analysis of a large number of studies. Above all, it should not be interpreted as any kind of explanation of educational achievement. It should, however, serve as a reminder of two important points: (1) In many educational outcomes affecting bilinguals, social class rather than bilingualism *per se* may be the factor of primary importance. (2) Findings concerning bilingualism and the effects of bilingual education are not necessarily transferable across social class boundaries.

The reasons why social class should affect educational outcomes are various. Educational research abounds with studies explaining the relation between social class and educational outcome. The educational war on poverty, initiated in the 1960s, produced a plethora of hypotheses for why the poor fail to learn. I do not intend to review all of these hypotheses and their potential validity. Hundreds of volumes have been filled with research and debate on the topic. However, I should like to mention just a few of the hypotheses relating poverty to lower educational achievement simply because many or possibly all of these hypotheses may, at least, have to be considered within any discussion relating to the outcome of bilingual education in the United States.

The hypotheses concerning the reason for educational underachievement of the poor are often grouped into two types: the "deficit" and the "difference" hypotheses. The deficit hypotheses see the reason for educational failure of the poor in the poor themselves and deal with variables like lack of stimulation in the

home environment, lack of certain types of verbal interaction, diminished self-concept, lack of motivation, and a feeling of relative helplessness of powerlessness (assumption of an external rather than an internal "locus of control"). The difference hypotheses tend to shift responsibility of educational failure of the poor to the educational institution and claim that the failure of the poor is related to the failure of the educational system to take into consideration that poor people in general (and members of poor ethnic minority groups in particular) come from culturally different environments. These differences may pertain to value systems, learning styles and, above all, differences in language and/or social dialect. As a matter of fact, the strongest version of the difference hypothesis simply assumes that the lower performance of children of the lower socio-economic class is basically a kind of illusion created by cultural and linguistic differences.

THE WAR ON POVERTY, THE LINGUISTIC MISMATCH HYPOTHESIS, AND THE *LAU* DECISION

One of the hypotheses most vigorously argued and debated during the war on poverty relates educational failure of the poor to their language: School language either is identical with or at least relatively close to the English of the middle class. The poor speak a dialect or, if they are not speakers of English, even a language quite distinct from middle class English. The greater the distance between language of the poor and the school's middle class English, the greater the poor students' educational handicap (Wolfram and Fasold, 1974). The main reason for the educational

failure of the poor is the mismatch between the language of their home and the language of the school and the failure of the educational system to properly compensate for that mismatch.

During the war on poverty, the mismatch hypothesis was argued first primarily with reference to the educational failure of poor Appalachian Whites and, above all, urban Blacks and was never meant to be the only and exclusive explanation for relative academic underachievement of certain groups. Certainly, with reference to speakers of vernacular Black English, the linguistic mismatch hypothesis has never been proven as the exclusive explanation of educational failure. However, it has quite recently been revived by the so-called "Ann Arbor Decision," (1980) in which a federal judge found that the Ann Arbor School District and the teachers working in it were denying equal educational opportunity to Black children by their lack of knowledge of the Black vernacular.

The *Bilingual Education Act* was part of the anti-poverty legislation and represents a rather clear-cut and obvious application of the linguistic mismatch hypothesis. Children whose first language is not English must--initially at least--be instructed in their first language in order to overcome the educational handicap caused by the mismatch. At the same time, the *Bilingual Education Act*, in its original formulation at least, did not imply that linguistic mismatch was the only source of educational difficulty and of some ethnic minorities: Use of the home language of the minority children was to be accompanied by acknowledgement of their home culture, a bridging of the home culture/school difference, and a resulting increase in self-concept.

Then came the famous *Lau* decision (1974) which stated that schools had to provide special treatments in case of extreme linguistic mismatch, e. g., the child speaking a language other than English. The *Lau* decision was followed by a decision on the part of the Office of Civil Rights that, under certain specific conditions, the only to compensate for linguistic mismatch was bilingual education.

The main rationale that led to the *Lau* decision was, unquestionably, solid. At the same time, the marriage between the *Bilingual Education Act* and the *Lau* decision had some unfortunate side effects: Bilingual education constituted a new approach that should have been implemented gradually as programs could be developed and, above all, as teachers could be either trained or retrained. The *Lau* decision and its enforcement made the new approach mandatory and required, in principle at least, very speedy compliance. A complex educational problem involving many variables was suddenly redefined as a legal problem related almost exclusively to only one variable, namely, language. As a result of the *Lau* decision and its implementation as envisaged by the Office of Civil Rights, the bicultural aspect of bilingual/bicultural education has been de-emphasized in recent discussions. Legitimate concerns mentioned in the original *Bilingual Education Act* like home/school cultural difference of children's self-concept are rarely mentioned. Under the impact of legislative mandate and legal interpretation, the emphasis has instead been placed on discussion of relatively mechanical linguistic criteria relating to mandatory "entrance" to or "exit" from bilingual education programs.

THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF BILINGUALISM

Why should upper class and lower class bilingualism have such different effects? To my knowledge, there are three possibly valid explanations, two that seem nearly identical.

The first explanation lies in the distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism made by Lambert (1980). Upper class bilingualism is "additive"; the first language of the bilingual is firmly entrenched. There is no fear of ethnic/linguistic erosion. The second language is added as a desirable skill or tool. The bilingualism of the lower class is usually "subtractive"; the lower class pupil comes from a community that may be undergoing first language loss. The first language is being eroded, often considered as being of lower prestige. The second language is not added to the first but often becomes a replacement or at least a partial replacement.

A very similar explanation of the differential effect of upper and lower class bilingualism is the threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 1979). In order for bilingualism to have beneficial rather than detrimental effects, a certain threshold level of proficiency must be reached in the first and eventually also in the second language. If the proficiency in the first language falls below a specific threshold level, bilingualism may leave negative results in learning and cognition. Lower class bilinguals--for reasons that seem implied in the subtractive nature of their bilingualism--tend to fall below the threshold level.

A final explanation considers the relatively low performance of lower social class bilinguals primarily as an effect produced by testing instruments. Tests used to measure the linguistic ability and/or other school performance use standard language. The languages of the lower social class bilingual are usually non-standard dialects. What appears as the "below threshold" level performance and lower general academic performances of the lower class bilingual is primarily the effect of the already mentioned mismatch between school tests and school language on the one hand and the child's home language or languages on the other. Personally, I feel that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Certainly, there is an impressive amount of evidence behind both the additive bilingualism and the threshold level hypothesis (Duncan and DeAvila, 1979; Cummins, 1980).

THE EFFECTS OF IMMERSION

Both the "threshold level" and the "additive vs. subtractive bilingualism" hypotheses explain the differences in outcome between immersion of lower class and of middle and upper class children for the purposes of second language teaching. Upper class children whose first language is firmly established above the threshold level benefit from total immersion into a second language, i. e., a program in which the entire curriculum is presented in the second language. Lower class minority children who cannot build on a solid background in their first language will not react to this treatment in the same positive way. In addition to the differences in levels of primary language, there are also other

numerous differences between middle and lower class immersion programs that have been summarized by various authors (e. g., Cohen and Swain, 1976). Middle class immersion does not involve culture conflict or potential self-concept damage; it is accompanied by high expectation, parental support, positive motivation, etc. In addition, middle class immersion, at least in the context most quoted in the United States, namely, the Canadian French programs for English speakers, does not involve immersion and competition with a peer group speaking the second language natively.

In connection with the above point, there is yet another that should be stressed. It has often been noted that immersion programs in French work so well for the English middle class children in Canada while immersion into English in the United States does not seem to work at all. The differences between middle and lower class immersion mentioned above are usually adduced in order to account for the so-called "contradictory data" (Paulston, 1976). Closer inspection makes one wonder whether the data are in fact all that contradictory. One of the main criteria used for evaluating the success of United States' programs for non-English proficient (NEP) children is the proficiency level in English children. The criterion level that they are expected to reach is native fluency and proficiency equal to the one of monolingual English speakers. By that particular criterion, the French immersion programs of Canada are probably failures rather than successes. As far as I know, the children of Canadian immersion programs seldom, if ever, reach the same level of French proficiency as the monolingual French speaking controls (Lambert and Tucker, 1972).

What makes the success of the middle class immersion practiced in Canada remarkable is not really the reaching of native French proficiency but rather the attainment of "high" proficiency level, good academic progress while being taught in the language of immersion and, above all, the ability to transfer skills in writing and reading achieved in the second language (French) to the first language (English). But transfer of second language (English) to the first language (e. g., Spanish) skills is not an issue in the United States. Nobody is measuring, or even concerned with it. The data concerning middle class immersion in Canada and lower class immersion in the United States are not just "contradictory"; to a large degree at least, they are not even comparable.

The above comment does not mean to disparage immersion (including the lower class immersion involving contact and competition with a monolingual peer group in the second language) as probably the fastest way of acquiring communication skills in a second language. Yet, when discussing bilingual education strategies, one should keep in mind that the rapidity of acquisition of English *per se* is not the main issue involved. The ultimate goal of all educational interventions in the United States is, of course, among others, the acquisition of English. But the rationale behind bilingual education is not that it will lead to more rapid acquisition of English than alternative interventions. The main goal of bilingual education is to avoid interference and damage in concept formation and academic development *while* English is being acquired. [It is therefore surprising that in the much discussed AIR study (American Institutes for Research, 1978), the

main criterion on which bilingual and non-bilingual educational programs were compared were relatively short-term gains in English language skills!]

This kind of damage may, of course, occur primarily in the initial contact with schools and in the primary grades. It is evidently for that reason that the Office of Civil Rights advocates bilingual education as *the* solution to "linguistic mismatch" in the elementary grades but allows for other solutions like intensive English programs at higher levels of education. Whether, of course, any damage would occur during an English-only immersion phase even at the elementary level may depend on various factors, above all, of course, the rapidity with which English is acquired. From all we know about how children acquire second languages, it is clear that one of the main factors involved is the intensity and frequency of contact with an English-speaking peer group. Children living in a minority language ghetto, having contact both out of school and within school primarily with other non-English speaking children, will take longer to acquire English than children who have a great deal of English peer contact and who often acquire English so rapidly that, at least from the point of view of avoiding academic and concept formation lag, bilingual education may not be necessary. [The latter consideration is evidently the educational rationale behind the Civil Rights Commission linking the elementary school "bilingual education requirement" to the presence of a sizable number of children of the same ethnic minority (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1975).]

THE EFFECTS OF MOTIVATION

The amount of peer contact with English speakers is, of course, only one factor influencing rapidity of acquisition of English communication skills. One factor often mentioned and widely researched in second language acquisition studies (Gardner and Lambert, 1972), but seldom mentioned in bilingual education discussions in the United States, concerns attitudes and motivation. In situations of large scale language group contacts, attitudes and motivation make a tremendous difference. There are tremendous and important differences in motivation and attitudes both between and within ethnic minority groups. These attitudes affect not only the rapidity with which English is learned, they may in turn have a great deal to do with whether bilingual education or alternate treatments are more successful.

Let me cite some studies related to my own research experience. Several years ago, a student of mine conducted a study in San Francisco concerning acquisition of English skills, primarily reading skills of Chinese children (Tang, 1974). She taught one group exclusively in English and the other group bilingually, switching between English and the children's Cantonese in the same classroom. The result of the experiment showed no significant difference between the treatments, but the treatments interacted at very high levels of significance with a measure of the children's adherence to values and language of their home culture and of their desire to integrate with the mainstream. The higher the adherence to their home culture, the more effective the bilingual treatment;

the greater their desire to integrate with the mainstream, the more successful the English immersion.

In an experiment in East Palo Alto, a colleague and myself (Politzer and Hoover, 1974) confirmed a very similar phenomenon with Black children being taught standard English. A treatment that used vernacular Black English and overt comparison of vernacular Black English with standard English was successful for children who valued vernacular Black language and Black culture. For those who did not, a treatment using only standard English language drills turned out to be more effective.

In a study based on data collected for a Stanford dissertation, Ferris and Politzer (in press), examined the English composition skills of two groups of Spanish/English bilingual students in a junior high school in Ventura County, northeast of Los Angeles. One group was made up of students who had the first years of primary education (K-2, 3) in Spanish in Mexico; the other group was entirely English and United States-educated. The two groups were of nearly equal socio-economic status, although in terms of some socio-economic indices, the Mexican-educated group was in fact poorer than the United States-educated bilinguals. In terms of objective measures of English composition skills (errors in English and evaluation of compositions by rating scales), the two groups were about equal. In terms of progress in school, the Mexican-educated group easily surpassed the all English, United States-educated Mexican-Americans. They had better grades, higher academic aspirations, and better and more frequent rapport with their teachers. These findings are reminiscent of other research com-

paring recent immigrants educated in their first language with totally second language educated minority students of the same ethnic background (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1979). The results can be interpreted as an indication of the beneficial results of a firm grounding (reaching a "threshold level") in the primary language. Our findings, however, suggest that the nature of the differences between the two groups, though perhaps associated with initial schooling in the primary language, are rather the direct outcome of the higher motivation present in the group of recent immigrants. Their immersion into English has pulled up their English skills at least to the level of the totally English educated bilinguals and has resulted in their moving ahead of them in academic records and aspiration because they like school better and they seem to be more motivated to achieve.

"LIMITED ENGLISH PUPILS, ENGLISH SUPERIOR"

Though I have no direct evidence in terms of relative English/Spanish proficiency measures, I suspect that the group of United States-educated bilinguals who fell behind the Spanish-educated group was comprised mainly of "Limited English Dominant" students. The fact that they were bilingual, entirely United States-educated, and had relatively very low grades in English makes it likely that they belonged to a much debated group of students who are "limited English" speakers, but whose English appears to be equal or superior to their primary language (Dulay and Burt, 1980). Just how many such students there are is debatable, and the exact number depends, of course, on the classification systems used. Yet there is

no doubt that the number is great.

How can a student be limited in two languages? The kind of test scores that result in this classification can be caused by anyone but most likely by a conjunction of various circumstances: (1) Students may perform badly in the testing situation for a variety of reasons like anxiety or lack of familiarity with the test; (2) Students may speak non-standard varieties of both languages being tested and therefore perform badly in the standard language of the tests; and (3) Students' total language proficiency, while being perfectly adequate within their cultural environment, may be a composite of two languages; but tested in either language, the student will appear deficient.

Whatever the reason for the limited in two languages classification, students within this group are the subject of heated controversy and--more importantly from their point of view--probably represent one of the most problematic and difficult groups of students to serve adequately. The educational controversy centers primarily on whether or not they should be served by bilingual education programs. Dulay and Burt (1980) argue that since their home language is their weaker language, these students need neither bilingual education nor instruction in their home language. What they need is to build up their English, perhaps with some kind of intensive remedial instruction. Cummins (1980) stresses that it is precisely this group of students whose primary language should be reinforced and brought to the "threshold level." Teaching them exclusively in English merely advocates the continuation of an approach that has failed in the past. The crux of the problem of

the limited English dominant bilingual may in fact not be linguistic but related to motivational and sociocultural factors. To the points made by Cummins, one could also add that students whose total language competence is indeed a composite of two languages should, at least in their initial contact with school, have contact with teachers who can utilize this total competence. I believe that of comments made by Cummins, the one related to motivational social factors may, in fact, be the most essential. In the long run, the important issue may not be whether the students should be taught in English only or bilingually, but whether we can convey to them and their families the conviction that they can and will succeed in school and in our society.

LOCAL FLEXIBILITY

In my comments so far, I have generally avoided making specific recommendations concerning bilingual education policy. The reason for this is only partly ignorance. It is primarily my conviction that overall generalizations concerning the efficacy of educational interventions are of doubtful value. I believe that it is possible to give valid advice in a specific situation in which many factors, usually not considered in overall policy consideration, may interact. The educational processes take place at a classroom and micro level in which teachers' competencies and attitudes interact in complex ways with individual student's characteristics like aptitudes or motivations. All of these interactions tend to be ignored when educational decisions are made as a result of governmental policy.

In a recent address, the Dean of the School of Education at Stanford University referred to governmental intervention in education as a "blunt instrument" (Atkin, 1980). Whenever I am asked whether I favor one policy over another, I often wonder how an anesthesiologist would feel if asked what kind of club should be used for the purpose of preparing patients for an operation.

The above comment does, of course, imply a kind of recommendation, or at least a personal preference. I wish that decisions concerning education in general and bilingual education in particular could be taken less in response to state and federal level regulation and more in conformance with optimal solutions arrived at through study and research at the local level. But I also realize that such a proposal may be unacceptable to many members of minority groups. The very fact that an ethnic group represents a minority justifies the fear that, in many cases, decision-making at the local level may, on purpose or even unintentionally, result in solutions primarily favoring the majority group. Still, perhaps one could think of ways that would combine local flexibility with an assurance of optimal solution for the education of minorities.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND THE BILINGUAL STATE

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that I am in favor of bilingual education. I believe in bilingual education as a useful tool for giving equal educational opportunity to some minority groups, and it is beneficial for the nation to have an increase in the number of people able to function effectively in more than one culture and in more than one language.

At the same time, I should make it clear that neither I nor (as I can gather from personal conversations or publications) the vast majority of educators advocating bilingual education believe in creating a multilingual society or state. As a matter of fact, multilingual or bilingual groups neither need nor want a multilingual state, provided one of their languages is the national language. Bilingual or multilingual nations come into existence not because of bilinguals or multilinguals. On the contrary, they are usually made up of monolinguals who do not want to learn each other's languages.

As far as the potential divisiveness of bilingual education associated with recognition of languages other than English in the educational system is concerned, I would like to conclude with two comments: (1) As stated above, bilingual education does not create multilingual states. If anything, bilingual/bicultural individuals help to avoid divisiveness and cultural rifts within a society. (2) While divisiveness and lack of unity within a nation are often associated with bilingualism and multilingualism, it would be a serious mistake to assume a causal relation between political disunity and linguistic and cultural pluralism. Switzerland is a linguistically and culturally pluralistic country, but it is politically unified. In Belgium, linguistic and cultural dualism is accompanied by a host of political problems and diversity. In Northern Ireland, the tragic civil strife has, at this point in time, no relation whatsoever to any lack of linguistic homogeneity. Civil discord seems to have little to do with linguistic and cultural pluralism *per se*. It rather reflects the nature of the

initial contact between ethnic and cultural groups and whether this contact resulted in the creation of groups of unequal socio-economic power, of super and subordinate status. If bilingual education in the United States can help in avoiding the creation or continued existence of ethnic groups of subordinate socio-economic status, it will contribute to our national strength and unity.

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